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CIA denies a role in Beirut bombing

By Roger Fontaine
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In a rare direct statement on intelligence operations, the Central Intelligence Agency yesterday strongly denied any connection, direct or indirect, with the March 8 bombing of a Shi'ite leader's residence in Beirut.

The connection was alleged by The Washington Post on Sunday — that a CIA-trained counterterrorist group in Lebanon went on a "run-away mission" in which it hired another Lebanese group to carry out a car-bombing that killed more than 80 people.

The denial strongly echoed what a U.S. official with close knowledge of the counterterrorist program in Lebanon told The Washington Times Sunday.

"It had nothing to do with our operation," he said.

The official said The Post's "attempt to portray a malevolent connection is both distorted and incorrect." He said the story was laced with distortions, but he refused to be specific, owing, he said, to the sensitivity of the question.

Other administration sources yesterday told The Times that the story had endangered the lives of Americans in the Middle East.

Said one official:

"The Washington Post has put the lives of every American in Lebanon in jeopardy. . . I find it utterly contemptible. . . It invites retaliation against every American in Beirut — including women and children. They [The Post] did it with foreknowledge of that possibility.

"They were warned," he said, angrily.

A Washington Post editor declined comment last night, referring Times' questions to Managing Editor Leonard Downie Jr., who was not available.

Meanwhile, the State Department yesterday alerted U.S. diplomatic outposts worldwide of possible ter-

rorist actions in response to Sunday's Post report. United Press International, quoting State Department sources, said a message was sent under "standard notification procedures" urging U.S. officials to be wary of retaliatory attacks.

The CIA's official three-sentence statement said the agency "never conducted any training of Lebanese security forces related to the events described in The Washington Post's article on 12 May 1985. It also had no foreknowledge of the Lebanese counterterrorist action mentioned in the article."

The Post story cited sources questioning whether the CIA had fully briefed the congressional oversight committees on the agency's purported connection with the Lebanese group.

In response to that, the agency statement said, "The CIA scrupulously observes the requirements to keep all the congressional oversight committees appropriately informed."

The New York Times, quoting unidentified administration officials, reported yesterday that a Lebanese unit in touch with the CIA hired on its own the group that carried out the bombing.

A source with knowledge of the Lebanon counterterrorist program told The Washington Times yesterday: "The United States has been giving some security assistance — anti-terrorist training, in terms of talk and weapons, but mostly talk — to the Lebanese government.

"These people apparently went out and talked to some others, who bombed some of their enemies. What we have here is, if at all, a third-hand connection between the United States government, the Lebanese with whom the United States government spoke, and the Lebanese who did the bombing," he said.

None of The Times' sources could say whether information or material that was given to the Lebanese government was transferred to the group that carried out the bombing.

At the same time, there was no immediate comment from the target of the March 8 bombing — Shi'ite Moslem cleric Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, leader of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah (the Party of God). But in statements immediately after the explosion, the Muslim cleric had made clear he would hold Americans and Israelis responsible.

"This Islamic popular funeral should stress the Islamic will to

show our rejection of all Israeli and American savagery," Mr. Fadlallah said at a mass funeral the day after the bombing. A "Made in U.S.A." banner was draped by his supporters on an apartment block destroyed by the car-bomb.

Mr. Fadlallah also has denied that Hezbollah is holding five Americans missing in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, another source with direct knowledge of the U.S. counterterrorist program in Lebanon said all leaks of information that were the basis for The Post story came from within the CIA. None of the leaks, this source said, came from within Congress.

"In fact, the United States government does not fund hit teams, directly or indirectly. But what people within the intelligence agencies have done here is to suggest that because some of the people with whom we were in contact fought for their lives as best as they saw fit, that we were somehow indirectly funding these activities," he said.

The United States, he said, has always been in the business of training forces, but "at a certain point, [U.S. trained forces] are on their own."

Criticism of the CIA, however, continued to grow, particularly among Democrats, echoing the "hit squad" theme.

"Where is the wisdom in financing hit squads in the Middle East, which is already a hair trigger?" asked Rep. Patricia Schroeder of Colorado. "Do we think that this would help the view of Americans that led to the bombing of our barracks in Beirut? Is this a wise use of our tax dollars?"

Rep. Schroeder and Rep. Don Edwards of California, Democratic members of the House Judiciary subcommittee with jurisdiction over terrorism issues, asked the House to support their resolution that the CIA

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be ordered to provide the House with documents and factual information about the training and support of covert counterterrorist units.

Meanwhile, the vice chairman of the Senate Oversight Intelligence committee, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, a Democrat, said his committee would examine "six or seven operations on our own."

Sen. David Durenberger of Minnesota, the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said that his panel "already has plans to take a detailed look at the intelligence community's policy and action on counterterrorism."

The administration received some support for counterterrorist operations in hearings conducted yesterday by Sen. Jeremiah Denton of Alabama, a Republican, chairman of the Judiciary Committee's security and terrorism subcommittee.

Ray S. Cline, former deputy director of the CIA who is now a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, said that Soviet "proxy states feel so comfortable. We could sober up that whole question by some carefully selected responses."

Mr. Cline said in most cases he favored economic retaliation, such as blockades, but also suggested "covert action to spoil or pre-empt terrorist action, which should be done without publicity."

But, he said, the United States has "not found the countermeasures that

will protect us from this danger. It is a free lunch for those who support this type of violence."

Meanwhile, stung by congressional and other criticism, the Reagan administration modified its initial policy of avoiding all comment on the story.

"I certainly have no comment," State Department spokeswoman Anita Stockman said early Sunday. "You're talking about intelligence matters and our policy is not to comment about intelligence matters."

But by Sunday night, the State Department had issued a stronger statement. The same spokesman said: "I can affirm that we do not undertake any activities which are inconsistent with the law."

"The security of our personnel and other Americans overseas is continually a matter under review. We take every appropriate measure to help insure their safety," she added.

That was followed yesterday morning with the CIA statement.

White House officials, however, continue publicly to refrain from comment.

Meanwhile, UPI reported from Beirut that a Lebanese Cabinet minister said yesterday he doubted there would be any investigation of the March 8 blast by his government.

Education and Labor Minister Selim Hoss, a Sunni Muslim, said, "We all know that such explosions are arranged by foreign services, and especially Israeli intelligence services, because catastrophes benefit those who have an interest at stake."

Tom Diaz contributed to this report.

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